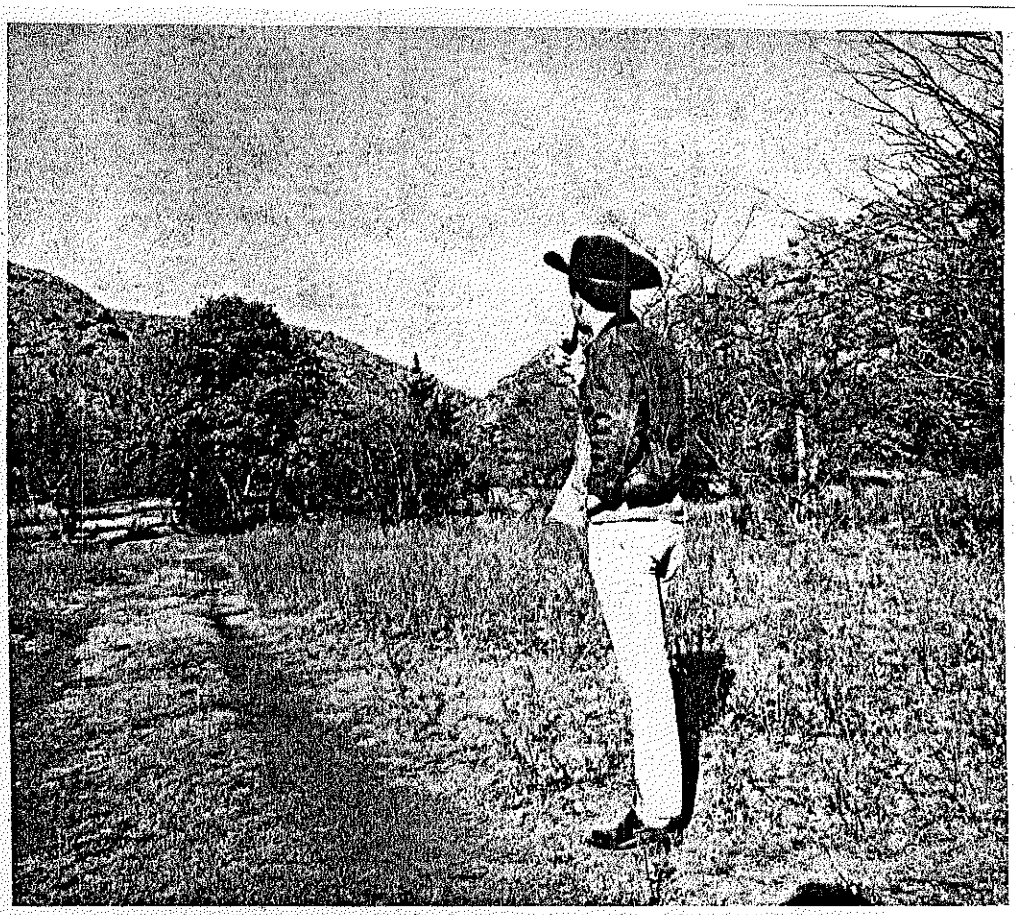
1965
&
1977

Haunted Canyon

BY STEVE WILSON



According to Indian lore, Devil's Canyon is haunted by ghosts in shiny armor.

If the ghostly canyon could speak, it would tell of ancient Indian villages, of Spanish conquistadors dressed in shiny armor, of bloody battles and bleaching bones.

This haunted ground is Devil's Canyon, now a part of Quartz Mountain State Park, north of Altus. The rocky gorge cuts a swath a mile and a half long through the southwest corner of Kiowa County before emptying into the North Fork of Red River, five miles southeast of the park lodge.

Devil's Canyon abounds with tales of Spanish treasure dating back 350 years. It was in 1611 that the first armor-clad Spaniards set foot in the Sierra Jumanos, now called the Wichitas. Friar Juan de Salas is said to have established a small mission among the Indians. Others followed in 1629.

Then came the gold seekers. In 1650, Captains Hernando Martin and Don Diego del Castillo prospected in the rugged hills.

The French, too, sought wealth in the Wichitas. In 1760, a trader named Brevel traveled up the Red River valley from Louisiana to barter with the Indians. At one time he heard a loud booming noise in the distance, and asked his Indian guide what caused the distant thunder. "It is the spirit of the white people working their treasure," replied the guide. After further inquiry, Brevel learned the Spaniards were blasting rocks in their attempt to find riches.

Probably the first Americans to witness Mexican miners at work in the Wichitas arrived on the scene in 1833. Simon Cockrell was with Allen Coffee's company of 25 men when Coffee established a trading post where the North Fork and Red River converge. Cockrell said he plainly saw an old Spanish road. Mexican miners were at work 40 miles north of Red River. They had a sheep ranch five miles from Devil's Canyon.

At this time, the Wichita Indians were living near the mouth of the canyon. They called themselves the Kidi-ki-tashe, sometimes known as the Pawnee-Picts.

The first U. S. government expedition visited these Indians in 1834. With them was George Catlin, the great painter. Lieut. Wheelock, chronicler of the First Dragoons, counted as many as 200 grass lodges in the Indian village.

Even during the California gold rush of '49, treasure hunters were digging in the granite-clad Wichitas. Thomas Carmack, a Mexican War veteran, joined a company of 80 gold seekers headed for the jagged hills. They carried a Spanish treasure map acquired from an old Mexican. But Carmack's party didn't stay long. Indians captured 21 of them. It was 4 days before they were freed.

Many ruins and relics have been discovered in Devil's Canyon. A buffalo hunter named Settles once found a cave containing a great quantity of ashes. Digging about 15 feet into the charcoal pit, he uncovered charred bones and skulls.

In 1891, W. F. Cummins, a geologist, examined the ruins of two old towns in the canyon.

There are tales of bloody massacres. Legend has it that at least twice Spanish miners and Indians battled it out in Devil's Canyon. In each case, the Indians were the victors.

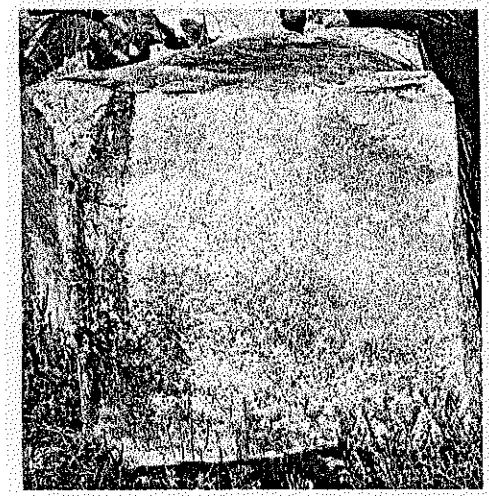
In 1895, an Indian woman who claimed to be 105 years old showed up at Twin Mountains, seven miles southeast. She was looking for three burro loads of Spanish gold she and two warriors had buried 70 or 80 years before. She said her people had massacred a whole band of Spaniards as they were taking a pack train out of "Haunted Canyon." She left without finding the hidden hoard.

At least one wagon train is known to have been attacked in the area. In 1849, a caravan of 45 families on the way to California was traveling up the North Fork. The party had set out from Clarksville, Texas. But the wagons got no farther than 70 miles up the North Fork when Indians attacked, killing most of the emigrants.

During the gold rush days of the Wichitas, Devil's Canyon attracted the first prospectors. And they found some interesting things. This story appeared in the Mangum Star, April 10, 1902: "Great excitement has been caused at Lawton by the unearthing by miners in the Wichita Mountains of an 85-pound nugget, 83 percent pure gold. It was found in Devil's Canyon, the scene of one of the ancient mines of the Spaniards, where many crucibles have been recently unearthed."

As early as 1892, mineral discoveries in the area caused so much excitement that a mining camp called Silverton sprang up just across the river from the canyon.

Rumors persist — even today — that a gold stuffed brass cannon, a silver casket filled with church treasures and a cave holding nine burro-loads of gold await a lucky finder, somewhere in Canyon Diablo.



Ancient Indian petroglyphs are to be found on Camel Back mountain, a few miles from canyon.

Jay Winters, Altus, displays relics found in Devil's Canyon. Note Spanish swords, old gun.